A Conversation with Tariq Ali

Jeet Heer

Tariq Ali has led an emblematic radical life. Born a red diaper baby in Lehore (now a city in Pakistan) in 1943, he broke early with his family's support of orthodox communism, becoming a leading member of the British New Left while still a student at Oxford in the 1960s. During the Vietnam War he gained a formidable reputation as a quick-witted debater, crossing rhetorical swords with such suave establishment apologists as Henry Kissinger and Michael Stewart. His autobiographical volume *Street-Fighting Years* (1987; expanded edition 2005) is both a vivid personal chronicle of the uprisings of the 1960s and an acute analysis of the achievements and limitations of the New Left. In recent decades, Ali has remained a prominent public thinker with a large international audience, thanks to his wide-ranging activities as a novelist, essayist, playright, and documentary film-maker. He is also an editor for the *New Left Review*, a journal of renewed energy and importance since it was re-launched in 2000. Since September 11th, Ali has once again emerged as a vocal and articulate critic of American imperialism. His recent books, notably *The Clash of Fundamentalism* (2003), combine polemical vigour with substantial learning.

This interview took place in Toronto on 3 May 2005, just two days before the British general election of that year.

HEER: Reading your recently re-issued book *Street-fighting Years: An autobiography of the Sixties*, it's noteworthy how many parallels there are between the 60s and the current juncture, as well as obvious differences. The most striking difference is the absence of any hope in the Third World. With Vietnam, there was a vision attached to a genuinely popular nationalist movement. Even if the United States is defeated in Iraq, which might very well happen, there is still the lack of a positive alternative. Do you want to speak to the differences between the 60s and now?

ALI: We live in a very different world. We live in a post-communist world. A world in which the very idea of communism, and related to it, of socialism, has become a lost continent. Atlantis. And nowhere in the world, with the exception of Latin America, do you see even an attempt to create an alternative to capitalism. China—the most dynamic capitalist country in the world; Vietnam—going down the capitalist road; North Korea—desperate for reunification. Which is all fine.

It's a very different world in which we live today and the resistance in Iraq typifies that. It's not the same as Vietnam. The Vietnamese resistance was led by the communist party and it was not simply a national resistance. It was a resistance with a social vision, an alternative. Today, in Iraq, there is a resistance, but it is very different. Some of the resistance is religious; probably, the resistance is mainly religious, but this minority of non-religious nationalism is also quite widespread.

The big affect of an American failure in Iraq would not be to produce social movements who would try and mimic the Iraqi resistance. But it will in fact make the Bush administration think very carefully before invading another country and taking it over in that particular way. You know, they will then revert to their time honored form of taking over countries by finding elites who will work with them.

The invasion of Iraq was a sort of adventure. And it blew up in their face, which is good. The Iraqi people have a right to resist, but we shouldn't pretend that it's like Vietnam. That's just wrong.

In terms of the changed world, the big resistance to the United States which has socially positive features is Latin America. The Venezuelan experience here is absolutely key. What is taking place in Venezuela today is progressive. It is posing a big challenge to neo-liberal economics and becoming a big pole of attraction in Latin America.

HEER: Can we again compare the 60s to the present? If we look at *Street-Fighting Years*, there existed a strong sense of internationalism and solidarity with Cuba and Vietnam. Right now, at least in North America, there doesn't seem to be a lot of solidarity with Venezuela.

ALI: It's limited, but it is beginning. There are groups active in the US, but it's not on the same scale as the solidarity with Vietnam because of the lack of knowledge—but it is beginning now, and that is very positive. But, most importantly, there is a massive movement of solidarity with Venezuela throughout Latin America.

If this succeeds then it's the beginning of a process. If it succeeds then I think the US will be incredibly unhappy and will try all sorts of things. They already have made three attempts to overthrow this democratically elected regime. So, it's very different from what's going on in the Middle East. But it offers a great deal of hope.

In the Middle East what we are seeing is a country that is refusing to lie down in front of the United States, saying, "here we are, rape us." Iraqis are not doing that, whether it's the young resistance and even strong elements in the political resistance. I mean, the big mass mobilization of three weeks ago had a quarter of a million people in the streets of Baghdad burning effigies of Bush

and Blair. The problem is that politics in Iraq have largely been taken over by religious groups of one sort or another. It's not the same in Latin America. It's a big difference.

HEER: In terms of the American attempts to overthrow the government in Venezuela, is it possible that the United States has become weaker in some ways? Some have argued that the idea of the US as a great hegemonic power is overstated, that the invasion of Iraq was a symptom of weakness. In some ways, the fact that there's a greater resistance in Latin America to the US would indicate that, in some ways, American power is waning.

ALI: I don't think American power is weaker. Militarily, certainly not. It is the strongest state in the world. Its military budget is way ahead of the next ten countries that come after it. It has now got military presence in 130 countries in the world, so I think it's wishful thinking to think of US military power as weaker. What is true is that in the post-Cold War world they do not have the same capacity to take their allies along with them in crushing countries which they feel are challenging their interests. In order to crush the Venezuelan regime, they would have to have the Latin American states on side, and not even the most reactionary states in Latin America are in favour of that. And the Venezuelans have been very clever in the way that they have organized the other Latin American countries. Even the Columbian president Uribe is saying "we are not in favour of any adventures in Venezuela." Precisely because the Cold War mobilization is over, they can't do it. You don't have military governments in most of Latin America. That's how the US ruled Latin America.

HEER: In asking the question of American power, we're partially thinking about the arguments made by Immanuel Wallerstein and his school of world systems theory. It's his contention that America's power has been diminishing since the peak of the 1960s and that the current adventure is an attempt to prop up a system that was on the way down.

ALI: I wish it were true. We could all then celebrate, but it's wishful thinking. There is absolutely no sign of this power waning. In fact, if you look at the state of the world today, even though some European powers opposed the war with Iraq, the moment the war began Chirac wished Bush godspeed and Schröeder called on the Iraqi people not to resist and the subsequent UN meeting provided de-facto justification by recognizing the occupation government. So the European opposition to Bush is incredibly weak. And what about the other powers?

HEER: Aren't they just speaking for the elite?

ALI: But these are—unfortunately—the people that rule these countries. And by the elite, one means the center left and center right. The Spanish center left has been very different, and pulled its troops out of Iraq, which has been a very big step forward, and that's a very positive sign. But, by and large, the bulk of the European elite—whether from center left or center right—they have no desire to break with the US. They want to maintain a western alliance against the rest of the world. Now, let's look at the rest of the world. Japan—a major power without a foreign policy of its own. To this day, the United States has not allowed the Japanese to have their own foreign policy. China—you need to hire a detective agency to go and find what is China's foreign policy these days. Very weak international presence. The Korean peninsula—divided, and with an American presence in the south. So, I don't see this thing of American power weakening.

In fact, American ideologues close to the Bush family have argued since the time of the first Gulf War that the question of preserving US hegemony in a world without enemies does not mean that we will not have to use force—sometimes against countries with the same social system as ours—in order to preserve this hegemony. And I think they will do it if they have to. Honestly, I would love to believe that the American empire is on its way out. And by the end of the century we will know which way things are going—possibly the middle of the century. But there is no basis for saying that American power is very weak. I know that world systems people think that but I just don't agree.

HEER: There seems to be this tension between optimism and pessimism in your activism and your more analytical writing. *Street-Fighting Years* is a very optimistic book, trying to reclaim the legacy of the 60s from its critics. On the other hand, the *New Left Review* is seen as a very pessimistic journal, a journal that is trying to come to terms with the historic defeat of the left. Do you see a tension there?

ALI: I don't, actually. I think much of what I write in this new introduction to *Street-Fighting Years* is no different from what I've written in the *New Left Review* or what others have written in the *New Left Review*. It's true that the first editorial published in the re-launched *New Left Review* tended to be pessimistic, but that was written a very long time ago. And, it was trying to focus attention on the left. There had been a historic defeat and the left was carrying on as if nothing had happened; it was living in a dreamland. On that, the editorial was right.

But lots of things have happened since then. History is far more unpredictable than one imagines, and, the *New Left Review* has readjusted according-

ly. There has been a whole series in the magazine on the movement of movements, long interviews with the intellectuals and the mass leaders of these movements. We've come out very strongly on the resistance in Iraq and in Venezuela. It's not a question of pessimism versus optimism; it is a question of being quite hardheaded and realistic. And quite a number of groups on the far left just fail to see that the defeat, and the triumph of capitalism has made any difference, and carried on operating regardless. If you do that, you don't live in the real world.

I think the first editorial [Perry Anderson's "Renewals" from the *New Left Review*, January/February 2000] was probably, in pulling the stick in the other direction, far too bleak. But I think we've readjusted, and the magazine is pretty lively now.

HEER: Aside from that first editorial, there is a tendency to point out certain weaknesses. I'm thinking of Perry Anderson's article on the Palestinians, which seemed to come to the conclusion that, short of revolution in Saudi Arabia or Egypt, there is little prospect for Palestine.

ALI: Well, I'm afraid that that's been vindicated.

The difference between the *New Left Review* and other magazines or groups is that it's not connected to building small organizations. You can't have a permanent desire to show the world as optimistic, otherwise you can't recruit any people. It sometimes leads to over-egging the pudding and then you lose people. People get burnt out. It's much, much better to be realistic in these sorts of things. No one doubts in the *New Left Review* that the situation in Latin America is incredibly encouraging. A big eruption of social movements—and genuine social movements, not NGOs. Venezuela is a pole of attraction. The United States is finding it difficult to topple the regime and pro-imperialist forces are on the defensive in Bolivia, in Uruguay, in Ecuador. Now, soon in Mexico, if Vicente Fox loses, it will be a big defeat for the Bushies. So it's a positive development. How far it will lead is difficult to say.

HEER: Can we return to the Middle East, because it all ties in with these questions of pessimism and optimism. It seems that the mobilization against the war, before the war started, was an incredibly positive development. That seems to have collapsed once the war started. Do you have any thoughts on that? Why did it collapse?

ALI: Well, I think it was a very strange movement. Some of the groups of the left, at the heart of organizing this movement, believed their own rhetoric, which is always a mistake. What was this movement? It was a genuine popular reflection of the disgust large numbers of ordinary citizens felt for the war

that was about to take place. Why? They didn't believe the lies of the politicians. The public was very skeptical. And so the sociological basis of these demonstrations were ordinary citizens, liberal minded people, who had never been on the streets before, who were angered for being taken for fools, and decided that they wanted to show their governments that they didn't want the war. Many of them believed that they could stop the war in this fashion. When the war took place and they felt they hadn't been able to stop it, they went back home. That's all there is to it.

Usually, movements against wars begin once the war has been going on for some time. This was an unusual movement, and it was a real attempt to stop a war. I was asked by lots of people after the big demonstration in London if the war would happen; on that day I was asked and I said "I'm afraid that it will." Well, what could stop the war? Two things: a general strike in the US, and the toppling of Blair in the House of Commons. Neither seemed very likely. So, I'm not surprised that that movement subsided very quickly. But it subsided in different ways in different countries. People stopped being active on the streets and, in Spain and Italy, became active electorally. In Britain, we're two days before the British election, but the war is playing very big. Blair's majority might well be reduced, and that might be a small step forward.

HEER: There's somewhat of a bleakness to the politics in the United States. Like you said, in Britain at least there's a possibility of punishing Blair.

ALI: And then you have Bush's second victory, which enabled quite a few soft liberals who basically supported him and kept quiet. Now they're coming out. There's a big turn to the right in the American academy and American culture as a whole. I was shocked by what passes for debate on mainstream television.

HEER: In terms of the legacy of the 60s, there's a kind of revisionist argument that's gaining ground which contends that the legacy of the 60s was the victory of the right. An example would be Rick Perlstein's book on the Goldwater movement, *Before the Storm*. The basic argument is that in the fifties there existed a consensus cold war liberalism in the United States and a consensus social democracy in England. But then the New Left challenged and broke the consensus, after which the right came in and picked up the pieces that remained. The legacy of the 60s is the triumph of Reagan and Thatcher.

ALI: What I would say to that is this: that I wish the New Left had been strong enough to break the consensus. I don't think the New Left had broken the consensus at all. But that's a foolish argument, because what you saw in the period that you call the 60s, which I would say was essentially a decade from 1965 to 1975, was a crucial formative decade. In 1965 you had the battle of la Drang

in Vietnam in which the US suffered its first big defeat. And in 1975 you had the fall of Saigon, and the stabilization of the Portuguese Revolution. It didn't develop and become a socialist revolution. In between, you had an attempt to overturn the social order in France with ten million workers on strike, the challenge to the Soviet Stalinist bureaucracy by the Czech movement, the socialism with a human face movement, the big Vietnamese offensives, the overthrow of the Portuguese military dictatorship, the weakening of Francoism, and victories for the Italian trade union movement by imposing a sliding scale of wages in relation to inflation. And you had a big cultural break with 50s conservatism in the realm of sexuality, women's rights, what could be shown on the screen. Some of those gains have not gone away. But then, when you have a big wave, either it sweeps all before it or it recedes. And that wave receded. Once that wave began to recede, it was the right that moved in. I don't see that social democracy was incapable of coming up with solutions. It was partially a backlash, and partially fear too: this must never be allowed to happen again. We must change the very basis that produced these movements. But what does that take away from the 60s movement? To say that created the basis is a joke. We could say that the collapse of communism created the basis for neo-liberalism and the wiping out of social democracy, which it did in a way. So what? That's history.

HEER: It's hard to know where they're going with this argument, except perhaps to rehabilitate cold war liberalism or to rehabilitate consensus social democracy.

ALI: Or to rehabilitate the idea that everything should be left to the politicians. Mass movements are by their very nature a threat to democracy. And democracy is the job of the elite and all the activity you should engage in is voting in an election.

HEER: Do you think that there's any possibility for a kind of secular politics or secular opposition—not necessarily of the left—in the Islamic world?

ALI: I think the question of secular politics is not only important in the Islamic world but also in the United States. One should never ever ignore that. I mean, would it be possible for the United States to elect a president who was a self-avowed atheist? Not at the present time, no. The problem of religion envelops both worlds. And I think we have to always fight for a secular, democratic politics. It's not easy, but I think the phase will come and that Iran is the most likely country where you will have a secular upheaval. Whether it happens in five, ten, fifteen years, I don't know, but it will come, I'm pretty sure of that.

HEER: Could secular critiques have an impact on these societies? Isn't the critique of religion, in some ways, a kind of necessary precondition for progress?

ALI: That is what I've argued, and I think it will happen in some of these countries. Iran, for me, is the most likely candidate. I think that those friends on the left who have embraced a sort of Sharia bolshevism are foolish. If you fight to take your argument to the terrain of people who really are not on your side, you can't get too much—this whole debate on the hijab, for example. I'm in favour of young women who, if they desperately want to wear it, to wear it. But I wouldn't say it's a great thing. It's their right to wear it if they want, but in large parts of the world they're forced to wear it. Like in Iran and Saudi Arabia and some other countries too. That's unacceptable. I think the left should have a pretty strong line on religion. Not a stupid line of not working with any people who are religious. That's foolish. But its own position should be clear. This equation of religion with multiculturalism is very dangerous because then you begin to defend religious schools. Once you make religious schools the cornerstone of your multiculturalism, say farewell to multiculturalism. People don't seem to understand that. All these religious schools are awful.

HEER: Is there a possibility that, within Islamic communities in Europe, you could get a more outspokenly secular culture?

ALI: I think it will happen in time. Just the materialist pressures will change the coming generation.

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